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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002150

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SUBJECT: KINGIBE ON NIGERIAN ELECTIONS, DARFUR

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador and Acting Political Counselor met with Babagana Kingibe August 16. Much of the conversation focused on domestic politics, including the 2007 presidential election. Many political commentators mention Kingibe's name as a "dark horse" 2007 presidential contender, and he admits that he is returning to Nigeria in September to "re-engage" politically after spending several years in Khartoum as an African Union envoy. Kingibe also spoke briefly about his "surprise" at the lack of interest in the Darfur crisis amongst Nigerians, given the number of peacekeepers Nigeria has contributed and President Obasanjo's personal leadership in the negotiations of the Peace Agreement. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Babagana Kingibe was elected Vice President in 1993 in what was widely regarded as Nigeria's freest and fairest election, though it was later annulled by the military and he and President-elect Abiola never took office. During the Abacha regime, Kingibe went on to serve in various cabinet positions, including as Foreign Minister. For the past few years he has been outside the country working in conflict resolution, first as a facilitator of the Inter-Congolese dialogue and currently as the African Union's Special Representative in Sudan. He is also a board member of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Kingibe is 61 years old and hails from Maiduguri in Nigeria's far northeast.

A "Reluctant" Candidate?

¶3. (C) Kingibe started the conversation by admitting that "the rumors are true;" he has been approached by people in various quarters and asked to run for President in 2007. However, he claimed that he has not made up his mind whether to run and said coyly that he is "not even really thinking about it." Kingibe explained that he has been outside of Nigeria for so long that he is almost embarrassed to presume he could simply come home and assume the nation's highest office. He explained that he will be leaving his position as AU Special Representative in mid-September in order to return to Nigeria and "re-engage" here politically. At present, he says he has no party affiliation, but he would probably join the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) because "it is the only party that has a presence in every village." Kingibe was very careful to avoid saying he wanted to be President, but he also made it clear that he is not interested in standing for any other office.

¶4. (C) When the conversation turned to the current crop of presidential contenders, Kingibe lamented the fact that none of them seemed to have any policy agenda. He did however

single out Jerry Gana (PDP) as the only candidate who "has a real program." (Note: Gana, a Middle-Belt Christian, and Kingibe, a Northern Muslim, served together in the Abacha government and are reportedly friends.)

15. (C) At the end of the conversation, Kingibe returned (unprompted) to the topic of his potential presidential bid. He said that he has been approached by both Wole Soyinka and Dawn Abiola and that both figures have told him that "they would not oppose" his candidacy in 2007. Presumably, Kingibe wanted to signal to us that neither the legacy of June 12, 1993 nor his service in the Abacha regime have been held against him by the Abiola family or leading social critics like Soyinka.

Nigeria's Indifference to Sudan

16. (C) Kingibe said he will leave his post as the African Union's Special Representative in Sudan by mid-September. He wanted to leave in August, but claimed that AU Chairman Konare asked him to stay in Khartoum until a suitable replacement can be found. He has agreed to stay "one more month only" (i.e. until mid September). During his time in Khartoum, Kingibe said he has been surprised at "Nigeria's lack of attention to Darfur." Nigeria has provided the most peacekeeping troops (3 large battalions), the AMIS force commander, and himself as the AU Special Representative, yet events in Sudan are simply not on the radar screen in Nigeria. Kingibe noted that the Nigerian media has "virtually ignored Darfur" and even the National Assembly and others in the political class pay little attention to the Sudan crisis. President Obasanjo has only visited Sudan once, several years ago, according to Kingibe, and that visit

ABUJA 00002150 002 OF 002

was "by the way," a mere whistle stop on another trip. Per Kingibe, Obasanjo did not stay long and he made no effort to meet with Nigerian troops. By contrast, Kingibe said that Presidents Kagame and Wade have been much more engaged and have made a point of traveling to visit their peacekeeping troops. Kingibe was not critical of Obasanjo for Nigeria's perceived lack of interest in Darfur. Instead, he blamed the inattention on what he termed Nigeria's "insularity" and on the incompetence of the Foreign Ministry. He complained that despite President Obasanjo's personal engagement in hosting the Darfur peace talks, there is no central point person in the Nigerian government that one can call to discuss urgent Sudan issues. He lamented the lack of a Darfur desk or a task force within the Foreign Ministry that could be called upon when urgent issues arise.

Comment

17. (C) Kingibe's perception that the Nigerian government is often disengaged on Darfur issues mirrors the Embassy's experience. It is often difficult to find an interlocutor at Foreign Affairs or the Presidency for our demarches. President Obasanjo is in many ways not only his own Oil Minister, but his own Foreign Minister and even his own Sudan desk officer, and he is too preoccupied to see us except on the most urgent of demarches, in which case he expects he will already have been called by Washington. Kingibe's resignation may be just one sign of what we fear may be a trend: that Nigerian attention to Darfur issues, even at the highest levels, will only decrease in coming months as the 2007 elections approach.

CAMPBELL